

Study finds increased fragmentation of TV news audiences along party lines

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Television news audiences are divided along party lines like never before, according to a new University of Georgia study that warns the trend may have damaging consequences for political discourse and democracy in America.

“Ideology and partisanship used to be completely unrelated to the television news people consumed,” said study author Barry Hollander, associate professor of journalism in the UGA Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. “But they’ve become significant factors in the last five years.”

Hollander analyzed five national telephone surveys conducted from 1998 to 2006 by the Pew Center for the People and the Press, and his results are scheduled to appear in the spring edition of the journal *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*.

The study found that in 1998, 18 percent of Democrats and 14 percent of Republicans watched Fox News regularly. By 2006, 36 percent of Republicans watched Fox News regularly compared to 19 percent of Democrats.

The trend for CNN over the same period shows a dramatic drop in exposure to CNN for Republicans – from 27 percent to 19 percent – while Democrats have remained fairly stable, with exposure rates of 25 percent and 29 percent in 1998 and 2006, respectively.

“Republicans have dramatically dropped news sources that they perceive as being biased against their position,” Hollander said. “They’ve completely fled into Fox and have left CNN, broadcast news and all the others – including CSPAN, which is raw content.”

In addition to finding that news audiences have fragmented along party lines, Hollander’s study found that individuals who do not identify strongly with either the Republican or Democratic Party are watching less news. Hollander said his finding is not surprising considering that the average consumer now has more than 100 channels from which to choose.

“What we are seeing now is the natural product of technology allowing people who never really have been interested in the news to find something else to do with their time,” Hollander said. “And what’s left is a fairly partisan red-state/blue-state news audience.”

Hollander said the increased partisanship of news audiences encourages networks to cater to the political preferences of their audiences – which in turn is likely to accelerate the trend toward politically divided audiences. Fox’s model of appealing to conservative audiences through commentators such as Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity is “obvious and overt,” Hollander said, while CNN’s efforts to appeal to more liberal audiences is reflected in the stories it chooses to report. CNN has spent an inordinate amount of time covering the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, for example.

Previous studies have shown that people who are not regular consumers of news are less likely to vote, meaning that the voting public is more likely to be comprised of partisans who get their information from news sources that reflect their beliefs.

“When you spend time consuming media that already agrees with your

viewpoint, you're really just talking to yourself," Hollander said. "And we know from other research that the more you hear your viewpoint echoed and reinforced, the more extreme your viewpoint can become. That changes how politicians appeal to voters, the news coverage of electoral politics and probably the kind of candidates we get."

Source: University of Georgia

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